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SUBJECT: Of Madonnas and Manifestos: Kansai Braces for
Historic DPJ Win

REF: TOKYO 1978

11. (SBU) Summary: Voters in western Japan are poised to hand a historic victory to the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) in legislative elections, tracking developments nationwide in a race highlighted by negative campaigning by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), a debate dominated by issues of economic security, and a stark contrast between the profiles of the two parties' candidates. Burnishing its credentials as the party of change, the DPJ has fielded a younger slate of candidates in which women make up one in five first-time challengers. While the LDP has grumbled about biased media coverage, their candidates may survive in some conservative districts as long-time supporters choose to split their votes between the DPJ and LDP in the single-seat and proportional races. End summary.

LDP Goes Negative

12. (SBU) In the weeks leading up to the election, every Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Komeito official with whom we spoke consistently repeated the mantra that the ruling coalition would not go negative because negative campaigning rubbed most Japanese voters the wrong way. With a week before the election and trailing in the polls, Hyogo LDP incumbent Shigeo Omae had a change of heart. On August 24, Mr. Omae's supporters were distributing pamphlets headlined, "DPJ = Nikkyoso", equating the opposition party with the leftist teachers' union, whose members occasionally make the news for refusing to sing the national anthem or failing to salute the flag. "We Can't Put Japan in Their Hands," reads the cover, showing a picture from an LDP rally with the Japanese flag displayed prominently above the stage, implicitly contrasting it with a shot from a flag-free DPJ event. The rest of the pamphlet describes changes to the national curriculum that Omae contends the DPJ is planning to implement, including "graphic sex education." Next to picture of a pair of anatomically correct dolls is the caption, "To advance its agenda of 'sexual self-determination,' Nikkyoso is trying to expose our children to graphic sexual education from an early age, teaching them how to use condoms, showing them videos of childbirth, even demonstrating sexual relations and childbirth with anatomically correct dolls."

LDP: We're Misunderstood - and It's the Media's Fault

13. (SBU) The secretary of the LDP Osaka Chapter insisted to us that the party has been unfairly portrayed by the media. "The media is playing up all this business about 'change,'" he sighed. "As far as substance goes, there's not much to the DPJ manifesto." He characterized the DPJ's momentum as a media-facilitated phenomenon, noting that news favorable to the ruling coalition, such as Komeito's increasing their seats from 22 to 23 in the Tokyo metropolitan election last month, went largely unreported.

14. (SBU) Still, for the LDP, the only way forward is to out-DPJ the DPJ in terms of offering measures to revive the economy and "guarantee livelihoods," the LDP official said. The LDP is encouraging its candidates to emulate their DPJ rivals and "go back to the streets" to canvass neighborhood by neighborhood, speaking to voters whenever and wherever opportunities arise. The LDP's late attempt to shift tactics has been somewhat frustrated, he admitted, by the party's aging campaign organizations, long accustomed to running top-down campaigns targeting business leaders for support.

15. (SBU) Surprisingly, in addition to blaming the media, the LDP official singled out both former LDP Prime Minister Koizumi and the bureaucracy for criticism. He placed the blame for a widening gap between rich and poor on Koizumi's decision to step down before his reform program was fully implemented. He also blamed local bureaucrats for the public relations disaster over lost pension records: "Of

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course we couldn't say it, but it's their fault. They resisted computerization for years to pad jobs." Pausing to reflect on the last election in 2005, he said that it went too well for the LDP. "It was a bubble. We managed to get 83 inexperienced candidates elected" -- the Koizumi kids -- "and now the bubble has burst."

DPJ: "Change" Platform a Vote-Winner, but How to Rule?

16. (SBU) At the DPJ Osaka chapter headquarters elation over the prospect of a historic victory was tempered with caution over the responsibility that comes with winning. Reflecting on the extent of voters' malaise, one DPJ official gave us his view that this election is about the desire for "stable livelihoods." "It's about young people not having to work one dead-end job after another. It's about old people not worrying if they can survive on their pensions. It's about parents getting the support they need to raise families."

17. (SBU) While DPJ Osaka chapter officials are optimistic that the voters' current mood seems to favor the DPJ challengers over incumbents and youth over experience, they are well aware that those same voters may not exhibit much patience once the DPJ take over the levers of power, and the clock will be ticking because the Upper House election is just a year away.

Female Candidates Step Forward

18. (SBU) The media has regularly highlighted the "large number" of women running on the DPJ ticket, paying particular attention to races featuring telegenic DPJ female challengers trying to unseat crusty male LDP incumbents. Some high-profile examples are in Ehime, where TV anchorwoman Takako Nagae (49) is challenging incumbent and former Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuhisa Shiozaki (58), and in Kyoto, where Mai Ohara (35), a former Self-Defense Forces servicewoman turned beauty queen and non-profit volunteer, is challenging ex-Finance Minister Sadakazu Tanigaki (64).

¶9. (SBU) Despite the media focus on the DPJ's large number of so-called "Madonna candidates," only 46 of the DPJ's 330 candidates, or 14 percent, are women. The comparable figure for the LDP is eight percent. Still, the popular perception among voters that the DPJ reflects "change" has been enhanced by the higher percentage of DPJ female candidates, as well as by the fact that women account for 20 percent of the DPJ's first-time candidates (32 of 164) and that the average age of DPJ candidates is 49.3 versus 55.5 for the LDP.

DPJ Courts LDP's Military Constituency

¶10. (SBU) Although the Japan Self-Defense Forces carefully observe political neutrality, the estimated one million votes of SDF personnel and their family members have traditionally gone to the LDP. A media contact in Kyoto told us that DPJ candidates are multiplying their appearances at SDF events in Kansai, such as port calls by Maritime SDF vessels in Maizuru, Kyoto District 5. MSDF personnel and their families account for 10 percent of the population in Maizuru, and our contact told us that the LDP is nervous that the DPJ is making inroads into what has been a key constituency there. DPJ candidates have also been seen with greater regularity at other base cities in Kyoto Prefecture, our contact reports.

LDP Still Rules Local Government - For Now

¶11. (SBU) Whatever happens on August 30, the LDP will still control local government in many conservative bastions like Shikoku. In Kagawa, a DPJ official moaned that his party has just three of 45 seats in the prefectural assembly. He

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said that local LDP lawmakers and their supporters had long made life difficult for the DPJ - for example, branches of the Japanese agricultural cooperative, Nokyo, refused to rent out their facilities for DPJ rallies. Some predict, however, that a DPJ victory on August 30 will have a knock-on effect in prefectural elections and will lead to more town mayors seeking endorsements from the DPJ.

Decentralization Proponents Favor DPJ

¶12. (SBU) In August, Osaka's popular Governor Toru Hashimoto and a group of local-government allies endorsed the DPJ, provoking cries of betrayal from LDP officials who had helped elect Hashimoto. Hashimoto and Yokohama Mayor Hiroshi Tanaka made the endorsement on behalf of the Shucho Rengo, a group of five local leaders who have joined forces to push Hashimoto's decentralization agenda. Hashimoto not only gave the DPJ higher marks for the decentralization planks in its manifesto, but he also praised the DPJ for "moving to change the fabric of the country by harnessing the energy of a change of government." The LDP's Osaka chapter, which along with Komeito helped Hashimoto become Japan's youngest governor in January 2008, exploded with anger at the news, with LDP Osaka chapter head Taro Nakayama saying he "boiled with rage" at Hashimoto's betrayal.

Kansai Komeito Incumbents Likely Safe, but What Next?

¶13. (SBU) Komeito is a force in Osaka and Hyogo, holding four of the 19 single-seat districts in Osaka and two of the 12 in Hyogo, but heading into the election, local officials seem resigned to the prospect of going into opposition. The policy director at Komeito's Osaka chapter told us philosophically, "We're not afraid of being in the opposition. We were in the opposition for 30 years before

joining the coalition. But it's going to be terrible for the LDP." Komeito is counting on its members' trademark zeal to stay afloat even as the LDP founders. Despite the success of all 23 Komeito candidates who ran in the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly race, the Osaka policy director noted that the party's candidates in Tokyo finished lower in their multiple-seat districts than last time around. In Kansai, Komeito believes it can hold onto its four seats in Osaka and two seats in Hyogo by attacking the "extreme" and fiscally irresponsible promises made in the DPJ's manifesto.

Schizophrenic Voters: DPJ? Yes. LDP? Yes Again

¶14. (SBU) Voters in traditional LDP strongholds seem poised to re-elect LDP incumbents in some single-seat districts even while voting for the DPJ in the proportional race. The DPJ, which is fielding candidates in 11 of the 13 single-seat districts in conservative Shikoku, will likely win several of those races outright, but all 11 of its candidates may well end up getting elected thanks to a strong DPJ showing in the proportional contest.

¶15. (SBU) In Ehime, the head of the DPJ's prefectural federation told us that although voters in Ehime were as fed up as the rest of the country, he expected their frustration to translate largely into votes for the DPJ as a party in the proportional election, with many of those same voters still ticking the box next to the name of the LDP candidate to whom they have long been bound by ties of patronage and loyalty. "They'll vote for the DPJ with their left hand and the LDP with their right," he said.

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